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An introduction

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Chapter 1: An introduction

June and July 2018, Edinburgh²

Therapy: Karl

"Time to stop," I say.

"It always comes around so fast, doesn't it?," Karl replies. "No, that's not quite true." He pauses for a moment. "Sometimes it's like we stand still. Like this all stands still."

He begins to rise from his chair, as do I, but, half-way to standing, left hand on the arm-rest, he freezes, crouched, staring ahead. "Sometimes, here feels like this," he says.

"Thanks for the demo," I laugh.

Stand-up: Sunday 23 October 2017, The Stand Comedy Club, Edinburgh

I am standing at the back, a glass of Twister Thistle IPA beside me on the turquoise, distressed shelf, waiting for Fern Brady's show to begin.³ It is 8.05 pm, for an 8.30pm start. The place feels subdued and not yet full. I am on my own in this corner. A man with a beard and jacket has joined me and I appreciate the company, though we haven't spoken. I am not interested in conversation. I have been standing alone here since I arrived. There were seats free but I feel less intrusive being here with my notebook than writing squeezed between others, who would understandably wonder why. It is not an innocent, neutral act to be writing in a comedy club.

Writing, 20 June 2018, Edinburgh

Not long now: this book is close to completion, the deadline of 31 July in view. The text has been calling for an introduction and the clarity introductions promise.

The writing-story of this introduction is one characterised by a dynamic of approach and retreat.⁴ At times, sentences have formed themselves into definite, purposeful shape, engendering in me a sense of solidity, like pegging the ropes of a tent in a strong wind. In those moments I can stand back and grasp what this book is doing, can see its contours. However, at other times, as with most of my tent-assembling experiences, there have been shaky, fractious moments – maybe it has to be so – and I have had to turn away for a while (to stretch my shoulders and back,

² Chapters, and some sections within chapters, indicate dates and places of the writing, suggesting the writing is situated, that it is a view from somewhere. Yet this is complicated by my having begun writing a chapter at one time and place, including drawing from earlier writing (as in the first stand-up entry on this page, which is from notes made at an event in 2017), and then often revising a chapter on a number of occasions, with those returns mostly remaining implicit. The book does not follow through chronologically but moves between times, working less with what Deleuze would call *chronos* – linear, sequential time – and more with *aion*, "time as potentiality, the sense in which time cannot be grasped because it is always simultaneously moving into the past and the future." Boldt and Leander, "Becoming Through 'the Break'", 2017, 418. See Deleuze, *Logic of Sense*, 1990.

³ *Male Comedienne*.

⁴ Richardson, *Fields of Play*, 1997. Laurel Richardson's book contains papers and essays, written over a ten-year period, alongside stories about how they came to be written, their 'writing-stories'. Writing-stories do political work in how they situate and position the writer: "Writing is demystified, writing strategies are shared, and the field is unbounded," 3.

to revise a sentence I am not happy with elsewhere, to make coffee) so I can consider how to come back to it differently. You might not hear this movement, this approach and retreat – forth and back, back and forth – in what follows, but it is there, pulsing between the lines.

Therapy, stand-up, writing

In this book I put therapy and stand-up comedy in circuit with each other, through and with writing, to see what happens. The book, in this sense, is experimental, playful: it is serious play.⁵

The book is not about therapy and stand-up, nor even about writing, for their own sakes, but about what they do together, how they speak to and with each other about, for example, surprise, directness, and relationality. The book's heart – heart as rhythm, movement and flux, not heart as static core or centre – is in how, one through and with the other, therapy and stand-up connect with writing as a method of inquiry, engaging and breathing with – and mobilising – theory throughout.

This theory, these theoretical bodies, these theoretical energies that inform the book, is/are those of Deleuze and Guattari, new materialism (or the new materialisms⁶) and affect theory.⁷ Such bodies of theory see affect, for example, not as belonging to one or more individual body but as a “varied, surging capacit[y]” that “catch[es] people up in something that feels like something”⁸, a capacity that, in Erin Manning's terms, ‘de-phases’⁹ in us before moving on elsewhere. Furthermore, from these theoretical perspectives, the ‘people’, the ‘us’, are not humanist individual subjects but entities ‘intra-acting’ with material, human and more-than-human others¹⁰ within a flattened ontology,¹¹ part of and produced in ‘assemblages’¹² of times of day, space, bodies, objects, movement and more.

I say these theoretical bodies and energies ‘inform’ the book, which suggests passivity on both their part and mine. Instead, I intend ‘inform’ to work in Erin Manning's active and processual sense of ‘in-form’ (after Simondon), of being active in, and party to, the book's taking shape.¹³ I tussle, I dance, I breathe, with these theories, and they with me; they shape me, they shape this book. As St. Pierre says, theory produces us.¹⁴

⁵ I am drawing upon Jasmine Ulmer here: “I find that playful writing can be helpful when it provides the time and space to distil what is important and is at stake. Play can be serious.” Ulmer, “Composing Techniques,” 2017, 7.

⁶ Coole and Frost, *New Materialisms*, 2010; St. Pierre, Jackson and Mazzei, “New Empiricisms and New Materialisms”, 2016. Coole and Frost pluralize ‘new materialisms’ in order to acknowledge the field's various and varying initiatives.

⁷ e.g. Gregg and Seigworth, *The Affect Theory Reader*, 2010. However, affect theory, as a term, is problematic. It is not a term Deleuze and Guattari use, for example. They talk of *affect*. Affect theory is perhaps suggestive of abstraction.

⁸ Stewart, *Ordinary Affects*, 2007, 1.

⁹ Manning, *Always More Than One*, 2013.

¹⁰ Barad, *Meeting the Universe Halfway*, 2007.

¹¹ ‘Flattened ontology’: in other words, there is no hierarchy of being, no one element (in that word's colloquial, not scientific, sense) of life (the universe and everything) that has precedence over another or is ever able to stand outside, or above, another. Everything is in it together: “[T]hings and people, social and natural entities, institutions and microbes are treated as analytically symmetrical.” Jenson, “A Nonhumanist Disposition”, 2004, 256.

¹² Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, 2004.

¹³ Manning, *Always More Than One*, 2013.

¹⁴ St. Pierre, “The Posts Continue”, 2013

I use 'counselling' and 'therapy' (and counsellor, therapist) interchangeably in the text, with 'therapy' shorthand for 'psychotherapy'. While there are arguments within the field about how counselling and psychotherapy differ, there is much they share.

I began my training as a counsellor in the early 1990s, completing it in 2001 at the Isis Centre, Oxford,¹⁵ my training throughout being *psychodynamic*. Psychodynamic theory and practice are located within the 20th century psychoanalytic tradition of Freud, Jung, Klein and their successors, and is concerned, for example, with the links between past and present experiences, and with the significance of our unconscious life.

I have long thought of myself as a psychodynamic counsellor, and that continues to be a story I tell, though the label feels slippery and happily complicated. I am influenced by other approaches, like narrative therapy,¹⁶ and over the past ten or more years I have been energised in my life and practice(s), including my therapeutic practice, by the theoretical charge of those I draw from in this book, in particular Deleuze and Guattari. Deleuze and Guattari's work is challenging of psychoanalysis, yet Guattari continued to practise as a psychoanalyst at the innovative La Borde clinic throughout his working life. I embrace Guattari's (and Deleuze and Guattari's) concept of 'the refrain' in relation to therapy in chapter 5.

I assume throughout the text that counselling is face-to-face, rather than, say, online or by telephone. Similarly, for stand-up, the particular interest of this book is in live performance, where a performer and audience share material(ising) space together, rather than recorded performances I watch or listen to.¹⁷ In both stand-up and therapy, what is crucial for this book's purposes is the immediacy, the here-and-now, flesh-to-flesh presence of bodies in/of rooms; the ebbs and flows of energy, how tension builds and is released: how affect, elusive and mercurial, happens, flows, erupts¹⁸; how affect – humour, sadness, anger, etc. – arrives in, moves through, and changes, becomes, the space. English comedian Ross Noble's comments concerning stand-up's immediacy speak to both stand-up and therapy:

"The joy and the secret of it is in that moment. It is not a passive medium – all the elements must come together, the ideas, the performance and the environment must perfectly align and the comic must merge all of these elements perfectly, controlling and timing everything just right while the audience gets lost in the moment."¹⁹

Noble does not go far enough here, though. It is not only the audience (and client) but also the performer (and therapist) who needs to allow themselves to become lost.

There are a number of stand-up genres and styles:²⁰ amongst current well-known UK-based comics, the likes of Milton Jones work with puns and word-play, others such as Mark Thomas work with big-picture politics, and still others, like Michael McIntyre, do 'observational' comedy. The connections I make here are not with these but with the genres of performers such as UK-based North Americans, Reginald D. Hunter and Katherine Ryan, on the one hand, who work with personal

¹⁵ The wonderful Isis Centre was the first 'walk-in' NHS counselling service in the UK, established in large part through the vision and energy of Dr Peter Agulnik, whom I was lucky to have as my clinical supervisor for two years.

¹⁶ e.g. White, *Reflections on Narrative Practice*, 2000.

¹⁷ There is one exception to this. I refer to listening to Reginald D. Hunter's audio recording of a Reginald D. Hunter performance in Chapter 3.

¹⁸ Stewart, *Ordinary Affects*, 2007.

¹⁹ Double, *Getting the Joke*, 2013, x.

²⁰ Double.

and often painful material from their own lives (apparently),²¹ and also with the deconstructive, postmodern work of Stewart Lee, whose attention and commentary is as much upon the here-and-now relationship with his audience and his own process as on his show's content.

This is not a pedagogic text about therapy or stand-up. I mostly wear the theoretical and technical complexities of therapeutic practice lightly, aware there is much more to say, understand and explore; nor do I claim expertise as either a comedy connoisseur or performer,²² knowing many of the form's subtleties and histories pass me by. Nor (my final disclaimer) do I do justice, I know, to the breadth and depth of the scholarly and theoretical literature on each of these sets of practices. Instead, the purpose of this book is to tell their stories, stories of being in the counselling room with clients and of witnessing, and occasionally offering, stand-up performances, seeking for those stories to speak to and with each other, as well as to and with writing and the book's theoretical forces. Writing through such stories enables me to live in and with both therapy and stand-up differently. It is my hope readers also will find this 'diffractive' work – putting one through the other through the other²³ – productive. I hope, too, my renderings of therapy and stand-up convey the respect and love I have for both the therapeutic and stand-up encounters, and the sense of mystery in what is made possible in both, alongside their inevitable muddle, mess and struggle.

Writing as a method of inquiry

Laurel Richardson's proposal in the mid-1990s that writing is a method of inquiry was groundbreaking.²⁴ Julie White's 2016 volume, *Permission*, explores the influence of Richardson's work over the years since, speaking both from her own experience and through tributes collected from over 50 scholars to how Richardson's writing has inspired and shaped their work.²⁵ As one such contributor, Larry Russell, writes,

"Many of us write because of [Laurel Richardson] – not writing like her, but writing into the silence at the end of her stories. She invites a level of disclosure found only in old friendships or fine writing. We are drawn into a conversation so faithful to our experience, so intimately radical, that we must carve out new ground to meet her."²⁶

The impact of Laurel Richardson's scholarship, and in particular writing-as-inquiry,²⁷ on qualitative research theorising and practice has been far-reaching. Radical and provocative, disruptive and generative, writing-as-inquiry continues to open both itself

²¹ Less the case with Ryan's more recent work. It is her performances of around 2014 I am thinking of here. See Chapter 3.

²² Chapter 12 will testify to the latter.

²³ I am drawing upon Karen Barad (and Donna Haraway) in working with the concept of 'diffraction': "A diffractive methodology seeks to work constructively and deconstructively (not destructively) in making new patterns of understanding-becoming." Barad, "Diffracting Diffraction", 2014, 187*n*. See also Chapter 11.

²⁴ Richardson, "Writing: A Method of Inquiry", 1994 and 2000. Richardson notes, however, that writers have long known of writing's heuristic power. It was in the academy, or the social sciences at least, that writing had become reduced to the instrumental function of 'writing up'.

²⁵ White, *Permission*, 2016.

²⁶ White, 15.

²⁷ I use this term because it is snappier than 'writing as a method of inquiry', and to challenge the implicit reductiveness of writing as (only) 'method'. See chapter 4.

and ourselves as qualitative scholars to new possibilities as we respond to the calls and challenges at the theoretical, methodological, ethical and political edges.

Having made those claims for writing-as-inquiry, and notwithstanding White's book, I would propose there is a 'quietness' to the ways in which Richardson's (and Richardson and St. Pierre's²⁸) work on writing-as-inquiry has been taken up. While qualitative research conferences host special interest groups on other (arguably) closely-related methodological approaches like autoethnography and, similarly, journals publish special issues and publishers have book series on such approaches, only a few of these outlets that name writing-as-inquiry as a focus.²⁹ It is the collaborative writing initiatives spearheaded by Jane Speedy and the plentiful collaborative writing assemblages (including mine with Ken Gale, together and with others) over the years arising out of Speedy's Narrative Inquiry Centre at Bristol, that I would suggest have taken up Richardson's proposal that writing is (a method of) inquiry most explicitly and extensively.³⁰

I first read and began to write with Laurel Richardson's texts at the beginning of my doctoral programme at Bristol with Jane Speedy in February, 2004. Ken Gale (who happened to begin the same programme as well that month) and I began to write together soon after, picking up on writing-as-inquiry as we brought collaborative writing into conversation with Deleuze and Guattari. Richardson's work has stayed with us, and with me, since. My contribution to Julie White's *Permission* reads:

"Laurel Richardson once asked me to read to her. Discovering writing changed my life (not always for the better). It wasn't just Laurel. There were other factors (where I was in my life, the loss of my father, a supportive workplace) and other people (some who knew it, some who didn't – I'm not sure which category applies to Laurel). Circumstances, people, places, time, even the stars perhaps, all aligned and I discovered writing. Nor was it about before or after, a turning point, a Damascene moment. That's not how it was, nor how Laurel would want it. But there was this one moment in May 2007, one I remember, whatever claim I might not make for it. There had been other encounters with Laurel, significant in their way, like reading *Fields of Play*,³¹ where she took me (and countless others) on her academic voyage; and, meanwhile, showed me how and what it was possible to write. There was 'Writing as Method of Inquiry' in the 1994 and 2005 Sage Handbooks, and 'Evaluating Ethnography' in a 2000 [important]³² special issue of *Qualitative Inquiry*. I had already found her, drawn from her, talked with her (not that she had been aware), talked about her (ditto). Yes, she was already there; here. But this moment, this series of moments, is what I remember most. It was nothing grand. It was a gesture of interest and generosity on her part, an unnecessary gift: She asked me to read to her a story I'd written. We were at a conference. Earlier, I had been in a workshop with Laurel. Others had read their work and I chose not to. That evening – no, it must have been the next day, or the day after that; some years on, I've lost the sequence. One evening, let's say, at the conference cookout, I was standing with friends at a table. Laurel Richardson approached, joined our conversation, and later asked me to read to her the writing I hadn't shared at

²⁸ Richardson and St. Pierre, "Writing: A Method of Inquiry", 2005, 2017

²⁹ See the programmes, for example, for recent iterations of the International and European Congresses of Qualitative Inquiry

³⁰ Such collaborative writing assemblages include Speedy *et al.*, "'Encountering Gerald'", 2010; Gale *et al.*, "Collaborative Writing in Real Time", 2012; etc. The Narrative Inquiry Centre is now the Arts-informed Narrative Inquiry Network (ANINET), University of Bristol. (The web link is too long to include here but is easily searchable.)

³¹ Richardson, *Fields of Play*, 1997.

³² I used the gendered, sexist term, 'seminal', in the original so have replaced it here.

the workshop. I did and she listened, as did the others (what choice did they have?); and the conversations continued. That was it, in a way. No evaluative discussion, no praise, no critique, just listening; but the story found a life in a collaborative writing project with others, two of whom were at our table that evening. And I found a life in this story: Laurel listening to my writing. It was nothing much, and it was everything.”³³

That text from *Permission* described my encounter with Laurel Richardson and her work. In what follows in this book I carry with me others’ scholarship on writing and/as inquiry. I carry with me Ron Peliás’ (and others’) *performative writing*, writing that “aims to keep the complexities of human experience intact, to place the ache back in scholars’ abstractions”³⁴; a writing that does,³⁵ a writing that aspires to intervene in the everyday of the personal/social/political; a writing that, as Della Pollock would put it, is *nervous*: “unable to settle into a clear, linear, course, neither willing nor able to stop moving, restless, transient and transitive, traversing spatial and temporal borders.”³⁶ I carry Deleuze – “to write is to trace lines of flight”³⁷ – and I carry Hélène Cixous, whose writing as ‘gesture’, is conveyed in this book’s title.³⁸

My intention in this sole-authored book (sole-authored, yet always collaboratively-written, as Speedy would argue³⁹) is to engage, engage with, and put to work, the claims Richardson, Peliás, Pollock, Deleuze, Cixous and others make for writing, as I move between therapy and stand-up and as I activate the concept of *creative-relational inquiry*.

Creative-relational inquiry

In late afternoon on Thursday 12 October 2017, we launched the *Centre for Creative-Relational Inquiry* (CCRI, or Sea Cry) in Edinburgh.⁴⁰ The rain fell, but from the top floor of the Edinburgh College of Art you could still make out Edinburgh castle to the north on its volcanic perch, its dim lights glistening. About 30 people attended the launch event, both from within and beyond the university: researchers, performers, artists, writers, therapists, policy makers; some local, some from further afield (one from Toronto, via Manchester).

Like the rounded shape of a shell you happen upon as your bare foot presses the damp sand, the notion of *creative-relational inquiry* emerged while walking on a beach in Cornwall in summer, 2016. It was Saturday 25 June. I remember: it was two days after the UK had voted to leave the European Union and we were mourning. The beach was the three-mile sweep of Whitsand Bay on Cornwall’s southern coast. We were staying with Ken Gale, who lives nearby.

For months I had been writing, dreaming, and talking with friends and colleagues, about the new research centre; about why it was needed and what it could do. I had played around with names. In early drafts I had called the centre, the *Centre for Transformative Inquiry* (too clichéd), the *Centre for Qualitative Inquiry* (too broad), and the *Centre for Transformative Qualitative Inquiry* (too both). The notion of ‘centre’ was and remains problematic, in its implications of stasis and hierarchy (as if

³³ White, *Permission*, 82-3.

³⁴ Peliás, “Performative Writing as Scholarship”, 2005.

³⁵ Gale, *Madness as Methodology*, 2018.

³⁶ Pollock, “Performing Writing”, 1998.

³⁷ Deleuze and Parnet, *Dialogues II*, 2002, 32.

³⁸ See chapter 2.

³⁹ “[A]ll writing is collaborative, insofar as all writing is an *embodied and imagined* accumulation of *selves and stories*”, Speedy, “Collaborative Writing and Ethical Know-how,” 2012, 355. Emphasis in the original.

⁴⁰ <https://www.ed.ac.uk/health/research/ccri>

it were something like a seat of government), but there did not seem an alternative, not least because of the designation of 'centres' within my university.

"Walking, dancing, pleasure: these accompany the poetic act," writes Hélène Cixous.⁴¹ It is not only about being at your desk in the back room typing, or sitting in the nook of your favourite café with your notebook open, pen poised. Sometimes you need to move, or move differently. "Walking-writing is a thinking-in-movement," write Springgay and Truman. I walked, barefoot on the summer sand, most likely not aware I was 'thinking' about this imagined centre but, for sure, aware of my sadness for my country, and there was *creative-relational inquiry*.

The name survived further drafts and comments from colleagues. I found the Brian Massumi chapter where he uses the term 'creative-relational',⁴² and, finalising the title for this book around that time in 2016, took the risk of using creative-relational inquiry as its framing concept. I wanted to use this book to explore the proposition of 'creative-relational inquiry', seeking to open up its possibilities through therapy, stand-up and writing-as-inquiry; to put this new and raw concept to work and see where it might take us.⁴³ The series of 'Intervals' in the book, in particular, pushes at these possibilities.

An overview of *Therapy, stand-up and the gesture of writing*

For four years I have been carrying versions of chapters of *Therapy, Stand-up and the Gesture of Writing* to various events, bringing the text to some sort of life in seminar rooms and conference spaces. When I now bring this book's imagined reader to life at their desks or in their living rooms, in airport lounges, in libraries, or wherever, it is similar audiences I sense I am writing/reading to: researcher-writer-scholars who share an interest in storied, performative and embodied scholarship;⁴⁴ those seeking ways in which they might bring current – and complex – theories to bear upon their research practices; and counselling and psychotherapy practitioner-researchers, and those in related fields (e.g. social workers, educators), who are looking for fresh ways to undertake and theorise their inquiries. My hope is there will be something here for each of these.

What follows works with and at the connections between therapy, stand-up and writing. I use the one to riff off the other, the one to provide insight into the other, the one to diffract through the other. At times, how they meet, how they encounter each other, is explicit, at others implicit. I tell stories and vignettes of and from the live work of a few well-known comics (well-known in the UK, at least) but more from the immediacy of routine nightly shows and the witnessing of often local, unknown performers at Edinburgh's comedy clubs and other venues. I bring into play my own ventures into stand-up performance.

Alongside – imbricated with – such tales, the book draws from my work as a therapist. The stories and vignettes of my work with one particular client, Karl, as we talk together in room 4 on Tuesday evenings at the counselling agency where I practise, run throughout the book.⁴⁵ I also feature work with other occasional other clients.

⁴¹ Cixous, 1994, p. 202.

⁴² See Chapter 4.

⁴³ I use 'proposition' in Manning and Massumi's sense: "Propositions are not intended as a set of directions or rules that contain and control movement, but as prompts for further experimentation and thought." Springgay and Truman, *Walking Methodologies*, 2018, 14. See Manning and Massumi, *Thought in the Act*, 2014.

⁴⁴ See note 231 for a troubling of 'embodied'. [We will have to confirm numbers will go from 1-231 or this note will not make sense]

⁴⁵ The counselling agency is *The PF Counselling Service*, a well-established and respected counselling service in south Edinburgh. <https://www.pfcounselling.org.uk/> I am grateful to Alison Hampton, The PF's manager, for her support for this project. My work with Karl is

I offer these stories of stand-up and therapy alongside those stories and poems of the everyday profound of writing-as-inquiry – including working, travelling, visiting my mother, mourning my late father, and more – suggesting how each (therapy, stand-up and writing) has echoes of the other. And through bringing these into conversation with each other I inquire into how this diffractive process does productive theoretical work with Deleuze and Guattari, new materialism and affect theory as the text pushes and pulls at a conceptualising and embodying of *creative-relational inquiry*.

Therapy: Karl

“Thanks for the demo,” I laugh.

“Not at all.” Karl picks up his coat and bag.

I open the door for us to leave, but he hesitates on his way out: “Thinking about it, this” – gesturing back towards the room – “never feels frozen. ‘Standing still’, I said, but what I did was to freeze. Being still isn’t the same as being frozen. Something happens in stillness.”

“Yes, sure.”

Stand-up: Sunday 23 October 2017, The Stand Comedy Club, Edinburgh

I notice the mural behind the stage. It is an image of a boy, perhaps 8 or 9 years old. He is dressed as a cowboy, with a pale cowboy hat, brown neckerchief, blue and grey check shirt, and yellow waistcoat. In his left hand he holds a toy pistol to his temple. He smiles; a thin, resigned, fuck-it smile. He in turn is, it seems, on stage, the shadow of arm and pistol on the dark wall behind him.

We are playing, the image seems to suggest through the picture of the child in fancy-dress. This is an act, and we are all playing, having fun, but the shadow suggests something more serious. We are playing with life and death.

The mural seems to be asking, what is really at stake?

Writing, 28 June 2018

It is all but done, this introduction, this one way into the book. Not the only way to begin, but it has been a way for me as writer to loop back into what follows. Meanwhile, I have been writing into other sections of the book, re-ordering, cutting, re-phrasing, and now, this Thursday morning – a high summer’s day that is calling for sun screen and ice cream – I have returned here. I will return again to re-read and to adjust but I sense it is all but there, ropes pegged and taut.

offered not as a ‘clinical case study’, with the implication it is illustrative of an aspect of therapeutic theory or practice. Instead, Karl is an encounter: “something that happens in between and takes on its own direction.” Jackson, “Thinking Without Method”, 2017, 670.